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Our Community Health News



WINNUNGA NIMMITYJAH
ABORIGINAL HEALTH & COMMUNITY SERVICES

Nothing About Us Without Us

November, 2023

Winnunga acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we work and live, and recognise their continuing connection to land, water and community. We also pay respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that newsletters may contain images or names of deceased persons in photographs, films, recordings or printed materials.

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1. Julie Tongs CEO Update



Picture above : I was very pleased to have recently been invited to provide a keynote address at the latest NACCHO conference which was held in Perth. See details in my update

I am prepared to claim, with a fair degree of confidence that there are very few Aboriginal people in Australia, who do not think that the treatment meted out recently to two of Australia's greatest football players, Latrell Mitchell and Jack Wighton, by

Both Latrell and Jack were arrested and charged by ACT Police with offences which were spectacularly dismissed following an admission by the senior arresting officer that he had given false and misleading evidence to the Court.

As Latrell said at the time of his arrest, when he was being held down and physically abused by several police officers, "You are only doing this because I am a blackfella."

While the charges against Latrell and Jack have been rightly dismissed this should not and cannot be the end of the matter. The Aboriginal community of not just Canberra but of all of Australia can rightly demand that as a minimum:

- The ACT Chief Minister and ACT Police Commissioner issue a public apology to both Latrell and Jack for the appalling treatment they suffered at the hands of ACT Policing;
- That the ACT Government provide full disclosure of the disciplinary measures taken against each of the police officers involved in this affair.
- That there be an open and independent inquiry into the treatment by ACT Policing and the office of the DPP of Latrell and Jack.
- That all ACT police officers undertake formal instruction and training in the recognition and avoidance of racism.
- That the ACT Government establish a public inquiry into the extent and prevalence of racism in the ACT Police Force with a view to ensuring that its extent is recognised and fully eradicated.

Another issue which I have again raised is the refusal by the ACT Government to keep the promise it made before the last ACT election to return Boomanulla Oval along with the Yarramundi Cultural Centre to Aboriginal community control. I have incorporated in this newsletter an interview I did with the Canberra City News which provides details of the background to this issue and the importance of Boomanulla Oval to the

Labor/Greens Government, break their promises.

I am, however, pleased to see that the ACT Government has progressed its undertaking to raise the age of criminal responsibility, in the first instance to the age of 12. This is an important reform. Changing the age will not, of course, by itself produce the hoped-for outcomes if the range of services, which Professor Morag McArthur has identified in her report on this issue, are not adopted and fully implemented.

I was very pleased to have recently been invited to provide a keynote address at the latest NACCHO conference which was held in Perth. While I was most happy and indeed proud to expound on issues pertinent to the operations and management of the Winnunga Nimityjah Aboriginal Health and Community Service I was also very pleased to provide attendees at the conference, who had come from across the whole of Australia, with a presentation on the operations of the AMC Health and Wellbeing Service, which is unique in Australia.

The existence and operations of the Winnunga AMC Health Service proved to be of great interest to attendees and it is to be hoped that all Australian jurisdictions will seek to emulate its success.

In conclusion I wish to extend on my behalf and that of the Winnunga Board our thanks and gratitude to all those members of the Canberra community who worked so hard in support of the recent referendum on the Voice. I am conscious of and understand the disappointment and distress that the outcome has generated for many members of our community. We must nevertheless resolve to not lose hope and to commit to work together and even harder for justice for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

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Boomanulla Oval's fate languishes



Boomanulla Oval, Narrabundah... “It is just really heartbreaking to see what it has become, it is another failed attempt from the government to step up and do something,” says Julie Tongs.

Photo: Lily Pass

IT is now seven years and three months since the ACT government released a request for tender, offering to return Boomanulla Oval in Narrabundah to indigenous management, says CEO of Winnunga Nimmityjah, Julie Tongs.

The documentation released in mid-2016 says: “The territory has issued this RFT to assess the interest, capability and experience of the successful proponent to take over management of Boomanulla Oval.”

In response, Ms Tongs says Winnunga Nimmityjah engaged the highly regarded planning and design company Judd Studio to develop a strategic plan for the sustainable indigenous management of Boomanulla Oval.

[Click on link to read full story.](#)

3. Why did Rattenbury turn his back on troubled TJ?

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Indigenous leader JULIE TONGS says the death of a young Aboriginal man in a prison far away in NSW, by his own hand, alone and sad has caused her 'unutterable distress' because it could have been prevented.

WHILE it is often said that the factors that shape our lives and determine our fate exist or are present at the time of our birth, I have long believed that for most Aboriginal people the course of our lives is settled at conception.



This is something I have reflected on in the weeks since the tragic death of Tian-Jarrah ("TJ") Dennis in Silverwater prison in NSW.

TJ was a young Aboriginal man whom I had known for years as a client of Winnunga Nimmityjah, but for whom I had also developed a deep affection. TJ's death, in a prison far away in NSW, by his own hand, alone and sad has caused me unutterable distress.

Upon hearing of TJ's death, I commented publicly that his death was both predictable and preventable.

I also said that the ACT government must accept responsibility for his death following its refusal, at the time it took the decision to transfer him to a prison in NSW, to respond to the advice and entreaties of TJ's medical team, which included a psychiatrist, to place him in Dulwah, Canberra's forensic mental health facility.

4. Listening to First Nations voices

The shadow Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Ms Elizabeth Kikkert, recently spoke in the Legislative Assembly about the strong interest that Julie Tongs and a considerable number of senior leaders of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community of Canberra have expressed, over a number of years, for an independent inquiry into the ACT justice and corrections systems.

Indeed, Julie Tongs, CEO of Winnunga Nimmityjah says she first raised the question of the need for a broad ranging board of inquiry style hearing with the then ACT Attorney-General, Mr Gordon Ramsey and the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Ms Rachel Stephen-Smith in July 2020. In that letter she said, among other things, the following:

[Click on link to read full story.](#)

5. From the archives: Indigenous Children in out of home care

It is both revealing and depressing to reflect on the myriad of reports and recommendations made over the years by learned experts, commissions and boards of enquiry etc into the needs of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. What is depressing is, of course, the extent to which the reports and recommendations have been simply ignored by Governments across Australia including here in the ACT.

6. Rachel shrugs off auditor's scathing report



ACT Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Rachel Stephen-Smith... “Are we there yet? Absolutely not. Do we need a partner to hold us to account? Absolutely, we do need that”.

As the minister extols the referendum ‘yes’ case, the auditor-general reveals a damning look at how her government is failing the indigenous community. JON STANHOPE & KAHLID AHMED say it amounts to deliberate acts of misrepresentation.

IN August, the ACT Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Rachel Stephen-Smith, talked up her working relationship with Australia’s first First Nations advisory “Voice”, the 15-year-old ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body.

[Click on link to read full story.](#)

ACT's clear disregard for indigenous voices

“Since 2020, Aboriginal leaders have unsuccessfully asked for an inquiry into the justice and corrections systems. In contrast, when concerns were raised about the handling of the Lehrmann case, an inquiry was announced within days,” says Liberal MLA **ELIZABETH KIKKERT**.

POST-referendum, many people are asking what should now be done to address the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians?



MLA Elizabeth Kikkert.

I say that the ACT government must start listening to existing voices and then take decisive action.

There may be no clearer evidence of this government’s disregard for the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people than its unenthusiastic implementation of recommendations from the Our Booris, Our Way review into child welfare.

[Click on link to read full story.](#)



Joint Coronial Inquest into Tragic Death of TJ Dennis

ACT Shadow Minister for Corrections and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Elizabeth Kikkert today welcomed a personal assurance from the NSW and ACT Coroners Courts that they will jointly investigate the death by suicide of Canberra resident Tian-Jarrah (TJ) Dennis in the Silverwater Correctional Complex in New South Wales.

[Click on link to read full story.](#)

9. ACT Labor/ Greens 2020 election promises

There are now only 11 months until the next ACT election but hey, who's counting?

What may be worth counting are the number of election commitments made by Labor and the Greens at the last election that have, as promised by them, already been fully implemented. The following list comprises all the promises made by Labor and the Greens which are of particular relevance to the Aboriginal community.

Julie Tongs, CEO of Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health and Community Services says that while she is aware that there has been some progress in the implementation of some of the promises that as far as she is aware many of them are yet to be implemented.

Julie would welcome advice or any information which anyone may have on the status of each of the following commitments in

promises were “core promises” and which, heaven forbid, were “non-core promises”.

The following are 35 promises which ACT Labor and the Greens made at the time of the last election and which they committed to implement before October 2024.

[Click on link to read full story.](#)

10. Auditor-Generals damming assessment of ACT failures to implement the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement

Elsewhere in this edition of the Winnunga News I have asked for anyone who has any information or insight into the status of the promises made by ACT Labor and the Greens at the time of the last ACT election, that were of particular relevance to the Aboriginal community, to please let me know.

The ACT Auditor-General has, in a recent audit report titled “Implementation of the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement” quite coincidentally highlighted a number of specific election commitments that have clearly not been met.

[Click on link to read full story.](#)

11. ACT raises age of criminal responsibility to 12 with 14 to

Attorney-General Shane Rattenbury. Picture by Keegan Carroll
The ACT's minimum age of criminal responsibility will rise to 12 after legislation passed the territory's Legislative Assembly on Wednesday afternoon.

The age of responsibility will rise again to 14 on July 1, 2025, however those aged 12 and 13 could still be charged with serious crimes such as sexual offences and murder.

[Click on link to read full story.](#)

12. We want justice': ACT coronial inquest opened into Canberra Indigenous man's death in NSW jail



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Kroll.

CONTENT WARNING: This article discusses suicide and contains the name of an Indigenous person who has died.

There's new hope some answers will be provided to the grieving members of the Tian-Jarrah 'TJ Dennis' family after the ACT Coroner opened an inquest into his death in a NSW prison.

TJ took his own life at Silverwater Correctional Complex on 5 August 2023. A coronial inquest is also underway in NSW. His name is being used with permission.

If you or someone you know is struggling with mental health issues, contact Lifeline on 13 11 14. In an emergency, contact Triple Zero (000).

[Click on link to read full story.](#)

13. Staff Profile Simon Costello: Deputy CEO

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Name: Simon Costello

Position: Deputy Chief Executive Officer

Who's your mob?

Noonukal, Quandamooka Nation

Where's your country?

Minjerribah (Queensland, North Stradbroke Island)

Who is your favourite singer/band?

Lenny Kravits and Hip Hop.

What do you do on weekends?

Yard / house maintenance, going cruising in the Hilux with deadly beats blasting, or riding my motorcycle - in that order.

What is your favourite food?

Mullet and rice.

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What do you like most about working at Winnunga?

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Our vision and the people!

My favourite pet?

My two dogs Bubba and Ruby

My pet hate?

People leaving the milk bottle in the fridge when it only has a
teaspoon left to drink.

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